

Confidence in Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] The reading this morning is from John chapter 11 verses 1 to 16. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

But when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this, he said to the disciples, let us go to Judea again. The disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again? Jesus answered, are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.

After saying these things, he said to them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him. The disciples said to him, Lord, if he's fallen asleep, he'll recover.

Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him. So Thomas, called the twin, said to his disciples, let us also go, that we may die with him.

[1 : 5 9] Well over these next four weeks we're going to be looking at John chapter 11, as Jesus Christ claims to be the resurrection and the life, and as he raises the dead Lazarus to life.

I've called the series Facing Death with Confidence, because you and I are being faced with death every day, and in a way that hasn't happened in this country for generations, whether it's the daily number of deaths, or the total number of deaths, whether it's those in hospitals, or those in care homes, whether it's friends and neighbours who we're conscious are ill, or have gone into hospital, or have died, and for some of us of course it's family members.

Death is very much front and centre, which is why over these four weeks we're going to be looking at this great chapter in John chapter 11, where Jesus Christ teaches about and confronts death, front and centre, as he shows us not simply how to face death, but how to face death with confidence. And there's no better time to do that than in the weeks following on from Easter, and the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself from the dead, never to die again.

As Her Majesty the Queen reminded us in her Easter message, Easter isn't cancelled. Indeed, we need Easter as much as ever. The discovery of the risen Christ on the first Easter day gave his followers new hope and fresh purpose, and we can all take heart from this. Now you may well be a convinced follower of Jesus Christ already, you may be a sceptic, you may have questions, you may be looking for answers, or perhaps somewhere in the middle. For all of us, the claim that Jesus has defeated death is a wonderful claim to be looking at over these next few weeks, because surely all of us know what it is to have experienced the fear of death. It was the Duke of Wellington who said a person must either be a coward or a liar who can boast of never having felt the fear of death.

Well today we're just looking at verses 1 to 16, where we're going to see that if we are to face death with confidence, we need to come face to face firstly with Jesus Christ, and secondly with death.

[4 : 29] So then firstly face to face with Jesus, and have a look at John chapter 11, verses 1 to 4, let me read them for us. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, Lord, he who you love is ill. But when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Why is Lazarus ill? Why indeed will Lazarus die? Why will Jesus bring him back to life? For the glory of God. The glory of God simply means the self-disclosure of God, the self-revelation of God, if you like. Jesus, in other words, is going to be showing us what God is like. It takes us back to the beginning of John's Gospel. You might like to turn to it. John begins in John chapter 1 with that well-known Christmas reading. Let me read John chapter 1, verses 1 to 4. He was, sorry, let me start again. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the life of men. A description of the creator God, the one who has made all things, the life giver. But then look on down to verse 14, and the claim that is in the very heart of the Christian faith. Verse 14, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. We've seen his glory. We've seen his self-disclosure. We've seen in the flesh, in flesh and bone, what God is like. God the Son, come from God the Father. And so John finishes his introduction with the momentous statement in verse 18, no one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side. He has made him known.

Indeed, John structures his whole gospel around the miracles, all the signs, as he calls them, of Jesus. Each one an act of self-disclosure, as Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed God on earth.

And therefore, you see, back to John chapter 11, verse 4, when Jesus says that this is for the glory of God. The claim is not so much that God is glorious, because people knew that from the Old Testament.

[7 : 30] Rather, it is that Jesus Christ, who is fully God, therefore reveals God and shows us what God is like, so that God may be made known. It is a staggering claim, as Jesus places himself on an equal footing with God. When Boris Johnson was in hospital, and during his subsequent recovery, there's been a talk of the power vacuum at the heart of government, who has the real power to make decisions. Dominic Robb seemed to go out of his way to make the point that he wouldn't be seeking to upstage the Prime Minister, because he was not equal to the Prime Minister. And yet there's none of that here, is there? In John chapter 11, verse 4. Jesus is glorified, as God the Father is glorified, because he is fully God and fully equal with God.

Well, before we move on, I just want to think about a couple of the implications of that first implication. It shows, of course, that God isn't hidden, which is why if we're to look death in the face, and to do so with confidence, we need to come face to face with Jesus. You see, just look on to chapter 11, verses 25 and 26, and to the claim that lies at the very heart of this chapter. Now, we're going to look at it in more detail next week, but just have a look at verses 25 and 26. Jesus says to Martha, Lazarus his sister, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. He is most emphatic. I am the resurrection and the life. Now, that statement is either true, or it is the greatest fraud the world has ever known.

Jesus Christ is either fully God, with complete power over life and death, or he is, or he isn't.

Sadly, of course, many people opt for a myth, a kind of Christianity light, which believes in Jesus as a miracle worker or a good teacher, a great man even, but not God. They end up with a small Jesus, a Jesus who is just for the children, or a Jesus who only ever makes an appearance at Christmas, or a Jesus who is nice to know, well, he is nice to know he's there, in case there's a problem which needs dealing with, which I can't deal with myself. And yet an honest reading of the New Testament simply doesn't give us the option of a Jesus Christ who is like that. God isn't hidden.

[10 : 30] The second implication is that religion isn't the answer. Religion isn't the answer. One of the most extraordinary things about the last few weeks is the number of people, the huge number of people, who are now watching virtual church services online, such as this one. As the heading of one newspaper article put it recently, even those of us who don't believe that we need what we don't believe, so let me start again, even those of us who don't believe, need what religion can provide right now.

It's a very honest article. The journalist went on, we don't need religion, but as the crisis reminds us, we still need certain things that religion can provide. We need ways to express gratitude, to face death, to comfort ourselves. We need community and ritual.

And yet I think very strikingly the one thing the article didn't mention was truth. Surely the most important issue is not, does this make me feel good? Does this meet my needs? But is it true?

Surely above everything else, at a time like this, what you and I need is the truth, don't we? The truth about God. Does he exist? What is he like? The truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about what happens beyond the grave.

After all, how can we face death? How can we bring real comfort to others if we don't know the answer to those questions? You see, what Jesus Christ calls us to is not religion or kind of a vague kind of faith in something or someone somewhere, but faith specifically in him. I am the resurrection and the life, he says.

[12 : 21] Just as we learned before Easter that the testing kits the government had ordered to test whether someone had actually had COVID-19 were unreliable. They weren't trustworthy. And so they were rightly sent back to the manufacturers.

Because what's needed is a truthful reading, something that can be relied upon. Well, how much more should we only be satisfied with the truth when it comes to being certain of what happens beyond the grave?

Because faith in the Bible is always about trustworthiness and reliability rather than a kind of leap in the dark. It's always about faith in the person of Jesus Christ, trusting him, trusting his promises, rather than a vague kind of faith in something somewhere.

Facing death with confidence is only possible when we come face to face with Jesus. But secondly, facing death with confidence is only possible when we come face to face with death.

Now, one of the great tragedies of COVID-19 is that so many people are dying alone without their family or friends. In normal times, you might expect a call from the hospital and you're able to jump in the car and get to the hospital before it is too late.

[13 : 44] I remember even now, eight years after my father died, exactly where I was when I got that call from the hospital. I was able to jump in the hospital and go and see him. But it's that that I think makes verses five and six so shocking.

John 11 verses five and six. Now, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

It's the shock, isn't it, of that little word at the beginning of verse six. So. Having read that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, we might expect to read that Jesus jumped in the car and headed off to Bethany as soon as he could.

But no, instead, he stays two days. Two days longer. By which time Lazarus has died. He begs the question, what could be more important than healing someone who otherwise would die?

Why does Jesus delay? Well, he delays in order to bring Mary and Martha together with his disciples, together with a crowd of onlookers and us face to face with death.

[15 : 03] Have a look at verse 11. After saying these things, he said to them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.

Well, the disciples are clueless. They think Jesus is talking about literal sleep. Verse 12. The disciples said to him, Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover. Now, Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.

Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died. And for your sake, I am glad that I was not there so that you may believe. But let us go to him.

Can you see what Jesus is saying? It's as if he's saying, look, your expectations of me are far too low. There's a similar thing in verse 37. As the crowds are gathered by Lazarus, his tomb, and they complain.

Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man, referring to Jesus miracle back in chapter nine, also have kept this man from dying? But you see, what Jesus is going to demonstrate is that he can do something far greater than simply healing someone who is ill.

[16 : 19] No, he can raise the dead. And all, verse 15, so that they'll believe in him. One of the obvious questions that people are asking the moment is, what is God doing during this pandemic?

What is God showing us? Well, I guess one very, very obvious answer is that God is bringing us face to face with death. I was just looking at my notes on the last time I preached this passage in John chapter 11.

It was several years ago. This is what I said. Now, to many of us here today, death will seem like a million miles away. Many of us are relatively young. We have our lives mapped out.

The world is our oyster and death seems irrelevant. Well, you couldn't say that today. You'd be thought an absolute fool to say that today.

Of course, we naturally run from death. We hide from it. And yet notice how Jesus moves us towards it. A few years ago, my elderly mother had a period of months, several months, many months, when all she ever seemed to do was to go to funerals.

[17 : 31] Every time I phoned her up, one of her friends or neighbours or acquaintances had died. And she became a kind of professional funeral attender, if there is indeed such a thing.

She freely admitted how depressing it was, how sad it was. And I have to say, it did her good. It brought her face to face with death in a way which I don't think she'd ever really experienced before.

Certainly not over such a prolonged period of time and so many people. And I'm sure it is no coincidence that two years later, she became a Christian and put her trust in Jesus Christ at the age of 88.

Here's one writer describing what it felt like to be given a terminal cancer diagnosis. He writes, Now previous generations to ours would have counted it as a blessing to come face to face with death.

A blessing to have the grim reaper join you in your railway carriage, so to speak. And for the train of life to suddenly come to a jolt. Whereas, of course, we live in a secular culture.

[19 : 02] We live in a culture which only lives for today. A culture which won't talk about death. A culture which really has no answers in the face of death. Except perhaps what we often hear about there possibly being light at the end of the tunnel.

I assume that's why Jesus says in verse 15, For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so you may believe. Believe in the Jesus of verse 11, for whom death is simply sleep.

Because sleep is temporary. Jesus can raise the dead as easily as you and I can arouse those who are asleep. In fact, he can do so more easily.

Just look on to verse 43 and see what Jesus says to the dead Lazarus. He cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out! And he does.

Now, it's much harder for me to dig a teenager out of bed in the morning. It can generally take me at least three attempts to do so. Whereas the Lord Jesus can raise the dead. And he does it first time.

[20 : 12] Indeed, this is why John wrote his gospel. So that we would believe in Jesus. Just turn on to the end of John's gospel to John chapter 20, verses 30 and 31.

John chapter 20, verses 30 and 31. Let me read them for us. Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And that by believing, you may have life in his name. Now, we'll see more next week about the life that Jesus offers.

But just notice for now why it is that John is writing. It is so that people will believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Now, for some of us, as we see the way in which Jesus deals with Lazarus over these four weeks, it will reinforce what we believe about him already. And we need that, those of us who are trusting in Jesus.

[21 : 22] Especially at a time such as this. But I guess there'll be others of us listening in. And actually, this profoundly challenges our assumptions. As we ask whether our understanding of Jesus actually matches up with the authentic Jesus of history.

So just notice the previous verses, doubting Thomas. Back in John chapter 11, you'll remember, we are told that Thomas said he was willing to die with Jesus. So the fact that he doubts Jesus' resurrection, I presume, is not because he is half-hearted.

But instead, because he's clear-headed. He knows that dead people don't rise. He wants to see the facts. Which is just then what happens eight days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Jesus enters the room where the disciples are gathered. And verse 27. Then he said to Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands. And put out your hand and place it in my side.

Do not disbelieve, but to leave. Thomas answered him, my Lord and my God. That is how to face death with certainty.

[22 : 38] When we are confident that Jesus Christ is Lord and God. You see, what does it mean to be a Christian? Well, it means to surrender your life to Jesus.

What a hard thing, though, that is to do. We want to be in control of our lives, don't we? And yet we're not. For many of us, that will be one of the most uncomfortable things about this COVID-19 pandemic.

The realisation that we are not in control of our lives. I guess it's one reason why we find it so hard to talk about death and old age and dying. It's at that point that it becomes abundantly clear that we aren't in control.

And yet what a relief it is to surrender our lives to Jesus. Especially when it comes to the big issues of life and death. And then wonderfully notice verse 29 how Jesus anticipates the millions in history.

The millions of people through history who will believe in him. Yet they won't have had the privilege that Thomas has of seeing. Verse 29.

[23 : 48] Jesus said to him, have you believed because you've seen me? Answer, yes. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Thomas is not going to walk into the room where we are sitting.

We can't interview him. But we do have the eyewitness documents. Which means that we can do what Jesus anticipates here.

We can have confidence in Jesus. And we can believe in him. And there's no more important time to do that than as we face death all around us.

Let me lead us in prayer. This illness does not lead to death.

It is for the glory of God. So that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have made yourself known supremely in Jesus Christ.

[24 : 58] Thank you that Jesus, as God in the flesh, shows us what you are like. That as we hear his teaching, we hear the very words of God.

And thank you too, Heavenly Father, for the way in which the Lord Jesus brings us face to face with death. Something which we naturally shy away from. Thank you that he rose from the dead, never to die again.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, as we look at John chapter 11 over these four weeks. Please would you help each one of us to grow in our confidence and belief in Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.